Vicksburg

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National Military Park

Gone For A Soldier

A Soldier's Life

"I am now very comfortably situated for the winter," **a Confederate private wrote his mother in 1863, *"having a very nice chimney attached to my tent, and everything that tends to make this unhappy life pleasant and agreeable."* Millions of fighting men, North and South, made the best of life in camp, finding what comfort they could amid the hardship and tedium of soldiering.**

"It took a longer time to make them soldiers."

Like soldiers of all ages, Civil War troops were human, rarely speaking in praise of things. Quick to criticize, their writings tend to be more negative and sarcastic than one might expect. However, they had much to criticize. The war engendered an almost endless array of hardships – disorganization, filth, bad food (when it existed), boredom, primitive conditions, disease, little opportunity to go home, and sporadic mail delivery, often a soldier's only contact with loved ones.

Patriotism was deep-rooted, and over 600,000 men would die in pursuit of two opposing dreams. These sacrifices collectively formed the most severe trauma in our nation's annals. Nobody was ready for the conflict, least of all the 3,000,000 citizen-soldiers who went off to war with dreamy enthusiasm and youthful innocence. A nationwide belief existed in the spring of 1861 that one or two battles fought somewhere in the border states of Virginia and Kentucky would settle the whole issue. Initial enlistment periods were only three months in the North and one year in the South. The patriot's overriding fear was that peace would arrive before he got his first taste of battle. Men and boys flocked to enlist with an excitement of the unknown. Years later an Iowa officer unknowingly replied to these sentiments, stating, *"And thus they went to war. Only a short time was needed to teach them what war was. It took a longer time to make them soldiers."*

The appeal to arms began with advertisements, posters, and word-of-mouth announcements. A mass meeting or rally was the usual vehicle for actual recruitment. Such gatherings would be held on the community's courthouse lawn or in a meeting hall. Bands would set the mood at these assemblies, playing *"The Battle Cry of Freedom," "Dixie," "Red, White, and Blue," "The Bonnie Blue Flag,"* and similar patriotic airs. Leading citizens gave florid oratory and made impassioned pleas for men to come to the aid of their threatened country.

Most of volunteers, from both sides, were farm boys who brought with them the language, ideas, and customs of rural America. Friends usually enlisted together, with companies originating in locales. Neighborhood associations and attitudes were merely transferred to an army framework.

"The knapsack was a terror…"

Many units from affluent communities left for war loaded down with every imaginable item. The *"volunteer of '61,"* one of their numbers admitted, eagerly went off to war and *"carried more baggage then, than a major-general did afterwards. The knapsack was a terror, loaded with thirty to fifty pounds of surplus baggage…His haversack, too, hung on his shoulder, and always had a good stock of provisions, as though a march across the Sahara might at any time be imminent."*

"What a difference one year in service made...."

A member of the 4th Rhode Island gave this inventory of his gear: *"There was a full supply of underclothing, woolen blanket, rubber [blanket], three or four pairs of socks, half a dozen nice handkerchiefs, dress coat, fatigue cap, supply of ink, letter paper and envelopes, portfolio, photograph album, Bible, the journal in which these notes are kept, tobacco, drinking tube, comb and brush, shaving tools, two or three pipes, pins and needles, thread, buttons, etc., and other things that went to make up a soldier's kit in those days."*

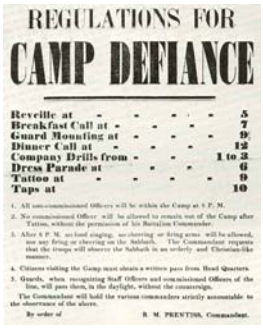
"Add to these the regulation equipment, haversack with rations, mostly obtained from home, and consisting of cold meats, bread and butter, cheese, pie and cake, and other food. Then there was the canteen, filled with – well, say coffee; and then there were the patent water filters, knife and fork, spoon, cup and plate, shoe brush and blacking, various kinds of medicine, and flannels for sudden change of climate or weather, a pair of warm mittens for the coming winter, and other things carried in our pockets. Everything stated here was thought to be necessary to our new life as a soldier…"

The same soldier later added, *"What a difference one year in service made…A woolen blanket and piece of shelter tent twisted together, and thrown over our shoulders; haversack loaded with a dozen hard tack and a small piece of 'salt horse'; little bag of coffee and sugar, mixed together; …little to eat, but plenty of ammunition; dirty, ragged, …But we were veteran soldiers then."*

Young and Slight of Build

Although the ages of soldiers covered a broad range, the typical recruit was a white, native-born farmer, Protestant, single, and in the 18-20 age bracket. Statistics on height are fragmentary, and only skeletal conclusions can be determined. However, most men of the blue and gray were in the range of 5'5" to 5'9". Balanced diets, enriched foods, and other basics of good nutrition were unknown at the time, resulting in soldiers of the 1860s tending to be slight of build. And the war was never a contest strictly between white Anglo-Saxons. A visit to any Union camp would reveal a plethora of foreign tongues. The overwhelming number of immigrants (mainly German and Irish) who had settled in the North because of cheap land and work-for-wages was clearly evidenced.

Bugle Calls and Drum Beats



REGULATIONS FOR

CAMP DEFIANCE

Reveille at	5
Breakfast Call at	7
Guard Mounting at	9
Dinner Call at	12
Company Drills from	1 to 3
Dress Parade at	6
Tattoo at	9
Taps at	10

1. All non-commissioned Officers will be within the Camp at 9 P. M.
2. No commissioned Officer will be allowed to remain out of the Camp after Tattoo, without the permission of his Battalion Commander.
3. After 9 P. M. no loud singing, no cheering or firing arms will be allowed, nor any firing or cheering on the Sabbath. The Commandant requests that the troops will observe the Sabbath in an orderly and Christian-like manner.
4. Citizens visiting the Camp must obtain a written pass from Head Quarters.
5. Guards, when recognizing Staff Officers and non-commissioned Officers of the line, will pass them, in the daylight, without the countersign.

The Commandant will hold the various commanders strictly accountable to the observance of the above.

By order of B. M. PRENTISS, Commandant.

The army camp was where the recruit ceased to be a civilian and learned how to be a soldier. He would spend more time in camp than in marching and battle, combined. Here he was introduced to the mysteries of the army – bugle calls and drum beats, the military chain of command, discipline, the necessity of taking care of equipment, and obedience to orders. He drilled as best he could and learned how to pitch a tent and use a weapon.

Field camps were the places where, *"…we were fairly initiated into the mysteries and miseries of a soldier's life,"* as stated by a Louisianan. The first camps gave every appearance of orderliness, with army regulations prescribing the encampment's systematic grid pattern. Officers' quarters lined the front of each street; enlisted men's quarters aligned precisely to the rear. Streets were a specific width; locations of kitchens and latrines responsibly pinpointed; and picket lines formed a symmetrical perimeter around the area.

However, adherence to regulations worked in inverse proportion to the length of the war. When war became drudgery, latrines and horse pens often were located upstream – which at the least affected the taste of the coffee. Throughout the war, the opposing armies tended to retrace or cross previous routes of march as they campaigned; all too often troops would camp in places that had held bivouacs before. The old campgrounds, with their accumulation of ruined structures, stripped vegetation and heaps of garbage, were always uninviting and often dangerously unsanitary. Even at new campsites, the presence of thousands of men rapidly overtaxed the land. In wet weather, the ground was converted to a muddy quagmire. In summer the mud turned to dust. Moving about camp in hot weather, remarked a Connecticut infantryman, was like tramping through an ash heap. If a grasshopper jumped, observed an artillery man wryly, it raised such a cloud of dust that the Confederates thought the Federal Army was on the move.

Home Away from Home

Within the boundaries of these makeshift communities, the regiment quickly became the center of the new recruit's friendships and loyalties, and the source of his knowledge of army operations. Men of both sides tended to be volatile, fun-loving, and sociably engaging. In their new surroundings, they at first reacted with pleasure. This was only a description of the first days of camp, however. Recruits quickly found themselves confronting a number of adversities. Excess and ill-fitting equipment became apparent. One example was the fancy-looking havelock, a particular dislike of which soon emerged. Made of white linen, it was *"to be worn on the head as a protection from the rays of the sun. As it was made sufficiently large to cover the neck and shoulders, the effect, when properly adjusted, was to deprive the wearer of any air he might otherwise enjoy."*

Havelocks quickly became used as dishcloths and coffee strainers.

When One Rolled Over, the Rest had to Follow Suit…

A tent was the soldier's home away from home during the spring, summer, and autumn months. Beginning in the war's second year, the standard abode for soldiers was the shelter tent. It rapidly became known as the dog tent or dog shanty since *"it would only comfortably accommodate a dog, and a small one at that."* Men learned to elevate the tent in sultry weather, so that air could circulate around the bottom, but, as one soldier of the 17th Virginia noted, *"…during the early part of the [summer day] and until the late noon, the heat inside was worse than that of the blazing sun without; the canvas seemed only to draw the rays to a focus and keep them there in one white blaze. And to add to the discomfort, swarms of flies infested the tents and could never be induced on any account to leave them; they seemed to think exposure to the outer air not at all conducive to their health, while anything like a walk abroad would be positively fatal."* When the quarters were shared, space was so cramped that when one man rolled over, the rest had to follow suit.

"Drill, drill, a little more drill…"

The normal camp day began with reveille near 5 a.m., with the assembled troops possibly having a short drill before receiving a summary of their duties for the day. The men were then dismissed to prepare breakfast, either individually or in groups known as "messes." The 8 a.m. drum or bugle call summoned guard details to their posts and alerted the sick to report to the regimental surgeon. Activities for the rest of the camp included building roads, policing the camp, making pathways of pine logs, extending latrine pits, gathering firewood and water, and repairing equipment, just to name a few chores. Most recruits who had rushed to enlist were unprepared for such menial tasks as these. Soldiers from all walks of life now found themselves as privates in the ranks, subject to orders from superior officers, doing the work of porters and laborers in all kinds of necessary drudgery.

A noon call announced lunch, then regimental drill occupied two or three hours. Men then returned to their quarters, cleaned weapons, and got uniforms into inspectable condition, for dress parade (if held) around 6 p.m. After retreat, the men had supper, with free time prevailing until 9 p.m., when the lights-out call was sounded.

However, one Union soldier left no doubt about his feelings in regard to the principal activity that filled most of the soldier's first weeks in camp. *"The first thing in the morning is drill, then drill, then drill again. Then drill, drill, a little more drill. Then drill, and lastly drill. Between drills, we drill and sometimes stop to eat a little and have roll call."*

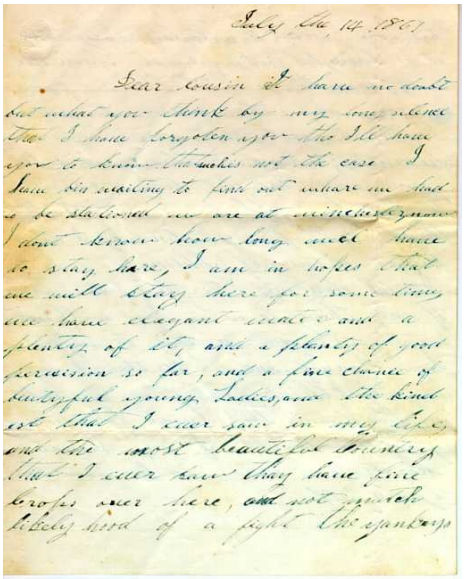
Thoughts of Home

A soldier had little opportunity to spend extended periods of time away from the army – leave was seldom granted. Federal troops were often stationed too far from home to get much use from a furlough, and Southern soldiers were too few and badly needed to be permitted generous leaves.

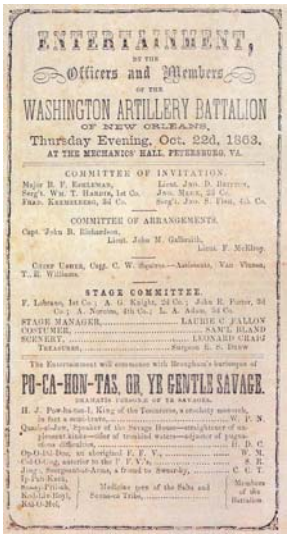
Many men had not been away from home much, and to say they were homesick was stating it mildly. Others acted like wild colts. The majority, however, were steady and reliable, and devised different ways to spend their spare time in camp. Reading (for those who could) was a treasured pastime, particularly of the Bible, followed by novels and newspapers of the day. Troops enjoyed periodicals such as the *New York Illustrated News, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *Southern Illustrated News*. Some regiments even produced their own newspapers, one being the Southern *Vidette*, whose satire aimed to mock the Yankees and entertain the troops.

Almost 600 Letters A Day

In camps of both sides, no diversion occupied as much time as letter and journal writing, which alleviated some of the homesickness suffered by the majority of soldiers. The volume of soldier mail in the Civil War was staggering, with an average of 600 letters mailed daily. The majority were examples of phonetic spelling and crude handwriting reflective of the limited educational standards of that era. Many soldiers took pride in improving their letter composition through practice, yet it was difficult because of their environment. *"I am sitting by a camp fire writing on my knee and am unable to see the lines by the dim light,"* Virginian Green Samuels wrote, *"and consequently write very crooked and I suppose scarcely intelligibly to you."* Henry Orendorff of the 103rd Illinois once apologized to his sister, *"Sarah please excuse my poorly composed & badly written letter. I would like to know how any body could write good or compose where there is so much confusion and fun going on."*



They Did the Best They Could


ENTERTAINMENT,
BY THE
Officers and Members
OF THE
WASHINGTON ARTILLERY BATTALION
OF NEW ORLEANS,
Thursday Evening, Oct. 22d, 1863,
AT THE MECHANICS' HALL, PETERSBURG, VA.
COMMITTEE OF INVITATION.
COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENTS.
STAGE COMMITTEE.
STAGE MANAGER..... LAURIE C. FALLON
COSTUMER..... SAML. BLAND
SCENERY..... LEONARD CRAIG
TREASURER..... Surgeon E. S. DREW
PO-CA-HON-TAS, OR, YE GENTLE SAVAGE.

More than any American servicemen of any age, the Civil War soldier was a singing soldier, though not all were truly adept at the art. As one Federal officer stated, *"The pleasure of music predominated, but it was more noted for diversity of tune and noise in execution than artistic skill."* Brass bands accompanied many units into service during the war's first year, and regimental and brigade bands were always welcomed by encamped soldiers in search of any entertainment. Yet for the most part, music in Civil War camps came from individuals. Any sizable body of men contained at least one fiddler of ability.

Popular songs were not the stirring airs inspirationally sung by folks back home, but melodies of sadness and homesickness. The all-time favorite of both sides was *"Home, Sweet Home,"* but also popular were *"Auld Lang Syne," "Just Before the Battle, Mother," "My Old Kentucky Home,"* and *"All Quiet along the Potomac Tonight."*

Theatrical productions were sources of pleasure for large numbers of soldiers. Professional casts made an occasional visit into the field, but camp productions were the usual and more enjoyed of the presentations. A troupe from the Washington Artillery of New Orleans staged several productions during long wintry months. Its satires were so popular as to attract overflow audiences that included *"some ladies from the adjacent country."*

Camp humor in the 1860s might appear adolescent by modern standards, yet in view of the limited recreational outlets for Civil War troops, anything that offered a laugh was eagerly sought. Soldiers on both sides were chronic teasers. Practical jokes were as frequent as drill. Sleeping soldiers were easy prey, a common trick being to pour a bucket of water on the man. Other pranks consisted of hiding muskets, stripping a man's tent in his absence, or even lowering a paper bag full of ammunition down the chimney of a log hut –the result being momentary total chaos.

Physical activities were in evidence at every encampment. Boxing, broad jumping, wrestling, foot races, and occasional free-for-all scuffles were all popular. No competitive sport was more visible in warm months than baseball. New and easy to play, high scores were the general rule, as the base runner had to be hit by the soft, thrown or batted ball before he was out. A game between the 13th Massachusetts and 104th New York, had the Bay Staters winning by a 66-20 score.

Wintertime saw snowball fights - generally contests between individuals or small groups, though several "snow wars" of regimental and even brigade proportions took place, opposing units arrayed in battle formation with colors flying. Even the generals themselves would enter the fray. These battles, a Virginia private observed, *"…were sometimes fought with such vigor as to disable the combatants."* A particularly severe engagement erupted between the 2nd and 12th New Hampshire. According to a participant, *"…tents were wrecked, bones broken, eyes blacked, and teeth knocked out – all in fun."*

Less athletically inclined soldiers sometimes concentrated on handiwork, carving pipes from brier root, while using bones, sea shells, and soft wood for rings and other ornaments.

Checkers and chess were the most popular two-man games, and gambling was a universal time-killer in every camp. Soldiers bet on horse races, cockfights, boxing and wrestling matches, and any other competition lending itself to wagering. Dice games were always popular, but card games were the overwhelmingly prevalent forms of gambling. Strict rules against gambling existed in the armies, and occasionally authorities sought to control it. But only one thing could bring an abrupt halt to the vice - the call to battle. Men would promptly throw away cards, dice, and other gambling instruments so that, if wounded or killed, no *"passports to sin"* would be found on their persons. Such repentance was generally short-lived. The more ardent gamblers who survived would rush frantically into woods and fields to retrieve the discarded items.

Most Civil War soldiers who indulged freely in raucous camp activities, just as freely relinquished them on returning home at war's end. The evidence is overwhelming that the majority of Confederates and Federals were conscientious, devoted men possessed of simple but indelible virtues. They sought to do the best they could in an atmosphere over which they had no control. How well they met hardships and temptations during long months in camp varied with the individual. An Iowa private spoke for all when he declared, *"There is one thing certain, the Army will either make a man better or worse morally speaking."*

George A. Gibbs of the 18th Mississippi, who lost a leg in battle, wrote after a long life, *"I look back now, after so many years, on those turbulent times, and wonder where I found the fortitude, patience, and endurance to pass through so many trying experiences suffered during the four years of the war. In most cases I believe we gather strength, courage and fortitude when circumstances are such as to require them."*